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## Baccalaureate, Spring 2018

May 26, 2018

Congratulations. You've reached the finish line. You are one day away from receiving your diploma. Your Middlebury education is complete.

You have earned your Middlebury degree, and with that degree comes rights—and also responsibilities. You are graduating into a world that needs you. It needs your optimism, your capacity to create change, and your passion for truth and accountability more than ever.

With your Middlebury education, you are going out into the world with the ability to sow hope where there is pessimism, to facilitate change where there is stagnation, and to hold institutions and authorities accountable to those they purport to serve—and with your education, you are responsible for doing so.

Yes, that's a lot of responsibility. But as I look at all that you have done since you began here, there is no doubt in my mind that you are fully prepared to take it on. The 352 women and 310 men who are seated in front of me right now, together and as individuals, have already accomplished what most people couldn't dream of doing in a lifetime.

Let me offer you some numbers as evidence. Of the 662 members of the Class of 2018, 143 of you completed joint or dual majors. Thirty-four of you majored in a foreign language, 68 attended the summer Language Schools, and 369 of you went abroad for a semester, or a year, to 46 different countries, studying in another language.

You have competed in athletics, with three teams—women's lacrosse, field hockey, and men's tennis—winning national titles. And one of you was half of the pair that won the NCAA men's doubles title in tennis. You won 16 NESCAC Championships, 31 of you were named All-Americans, and 111 of you combined academics and sports to be named on the All-NESCAC academic team. And beyond varsity athletics, you've also played a dozen club sports, including Ultimate Frisbee, which headed to the Division III national championships in Illinois last weekend and made it to the semifinals.

You have created connections through community service in Addison County and beyond. Seventy-one of you participated in a Middlebury Alternative Break trip, and 11 of you led your fellow classmates to explore issues like food justice in urban environments, the social impact of sustainable coffee in Guatemala, and environmental practices in Puerto Rico. Thirty-one of you received Cross-Cultural Community Service Fund grants to travel to countries like Rwanda, and to volunteer with GROW Africa. Seventeen of you are current Community Friends mentors who have spent two hours or more each week with an elementary-age child in Addison County—and three of you have been paired with the same child for all four years. Ten of you were Privilege & Poverty national interns, and seven more were Addison County interns.

Then there's what you've accomplished as individuals and in small groups. You organized Nocturne, an all-night campus art festival. You organized a sold-out TEDx conference. Two of you received the Projects for Peace grant, and with that grant you will run a leadership development and empowerment camp for people with albinism in Kenya this summer.

You led the Makerspace initiative on campus; you founded Middlebury Foods to provide wholesome food to Addison County families; you created a new line of women's outdoor pants. You conducted research on ethnic nationalism in Russia, the spring migration of Svalbard reindeer, and Dante's poetic hand in *The Divine Comedy*. You helped curate museum exhibitions and produced and performed in hundreds of artistic events.

And you challenged us, helping us reach our goal of carbon neutrality; increasing campus diversity; reiterating our support of our DACA and undocumented students; broadening our understanding of accessibility; expanding the kinds of conversations we are having on campus; reconfiguring our curriculum.

So much of what you have done at Middlebury celebrates our potential and addresses the ills that divide us. Now you are about to go out into the world to do more of that. And here's the question: How will you continue to live up to the responsibilities of the life that lies ahead, responsibilities that accompany, and will continue to accompany, the privilege and possibility of a Middlebury education? How can you as Middlebury graduates of 2018 continue to think in a new hopeful way about your work in this world?

This year, I have been listening to you—at the spring research symposium, at Posse dinners, at state-of-the-College conversations, at hockey games, in Crossroads, at Otter Creek Bakery. And I think I have the beginning of an answer to that question.

You are keenly aware that you are graduating into a world of dramatic environmental shifts, of rapid information exchange that seems only to divide and not unite, of threats to democratic process and a vibrant public sphere, and of global hyperconnection that only seems to make us more globally suspicious.

In the words of Middlebury alumnus and Emmy Award-winning journalist Frank Sesno, Class of '77, these are the themes of your times: "The fast clash of fact and opinion, the polarization amid the plenty, the search for identity amid the agonizing pains of a

changing planet. We now inhabit a place where people and ideas, business and trends, traditions and history cross time zones and borders faster and more freely than ever in human history—but accompanied by incitement and suspicion, intolerance and hate, germs and CO2.”

Frank then asks us, “So what do we make of this? How do we navigate it?” Or, to ask his question another way, the way you have asked it, “How do we live together?”

I have been struck by how many of you are asking that big, long-term question—a question that goes far back into the past, and yet has a particular urgency now. You represent the best of Middlebury in asking, because at its best, Middlebury is rigorous, fair, and community-minded. And we are also rooted in a deep understanding of the past as well as mindful of the future.

In fact, your question, “How do we live together?” is rooted in an earlier time of tumult. We send you out into the world just as we are about to welcome the Class of 1968 back for its 50th Reunion in June. Like you, they graduated in a time of social unrest and change—a time of dissonance not unlike today.

Many of the issues you care most about were particularly resonant in that time. The Whole Earth catalog started in 1968. Then, students like you began to worry about the health of the whole planet, and to act to heal it. Now, in 2018, in the face of climate change, you want to take the next definitive steps in that environmental healing.

In 1968, Martin Luther King was killed. Racial violence and tensions not unlike today were rampant across United States cities. Then, students like you insisted on America’s promise of racial equality. Now, in 2018, in the face of an America that is more divided than ever, you want to fulfill that promise.

In 1968, the Civil Rights Act—known as the Fair Housing Act—was passed. As it was written and then modified over recent decades, the bill prohibits discrimination in housing on the basis of race, gender, religious orientation, or sexuality. Then, students like you insisted that no one should “steer” underrepresented groups away from places they wanted to live, or deny them any housing on those grounds. Those students began to answer that question in a literal way: What houses can people dwell in? How do we live together in such a way that all people can live in all houses?

Now, in 2018, you want to create ways that we live together so that the planet, and the human race, can survive. You’ve created it by entering the Race to Zero Elementary Design competition sponsored by the Department of Energy, and winning. You’ve created it by designing murals that build a greater sense of inclusivity on campus. You’ve created it by welcoming alumni back to your own events with grace and hospitality.

Here’s a story I lived with you. I was with many of you at the first track race at the Virtue Field House. That was a race in which 90-year-old Middlebury alumnus Dixon Hemphill, Class of 1949, was running. Dixon was and is the world record holder for the mile in his age group. And when Dixon finished his last lap, you cheered as alums who had already finished the race fell behind him to run that lap with him, helping him reach his goal. What a Middlebury moment.

And you’ve lived it in smaller, less dramatic but equally effective ways. Even in the midst of a campus that has struggled to talk across difference, you’ve built friendships across class and race and sexuality and religion and gender identity.

Here’s another of your stories I heard this spring. Last fall one of your fellow students had an illness and thought he could recover quickly and get back to work. And yet in his optimism about his recovery, he overdid it. He was exhausted. One day, in a residence hall he didn’t go in very often, he just lay down in the commons area and rested and slept. Someone came out of their room. “Dude, you all right?” “Yes, I’m all right. I just needed to crash and rest.” So the person from the dorm stayed with him. And then another person came and sat with them. And another. And while the first student was resting, they all began to talk. They all stayed there for a long time, just talking while he rested and recovered. “Those have now become the people I have hung out with this spring,” the student said. The friendships have lasted through now, even though he’s much better.

This is a simple story about spontaneous friendships in the last semester of a college experience. A simple story in the midst of some of the most difficult times in our country and in the world. I will tell you now that this is also a story about spontaneous cross-racial friendships—in the last semester of a college experience, in some of the most difficult times in our country and in the world. And I won’t say who was who in this story. Because it doesn’t matter. As the student told me, “The big takeaway: it started out as me, just ‘hanging’ and has evolved to a relationship built on unexpected common ground.” At that moment you were all Middlebury.

Now we challenge you to live that ethos in the outside world. No matter where you have come from, you all now have the real privilege of a Middlebury degree. And if privilege is to be worth anything, it must be shared. We challenge you to share the privilege of your Middlebury degree by working to give others opportunities. You now have the obligation to find and to nurture that unexpected common ground. You have done this in a residence hall and on the athletic fields. You now have to do it in the more difficult place called the world. You can do this in the Peace Corps. On Wall Street. You can do this in your first classroom. In a global health NGO. In a manufacturing business. At a food bank. On a bus. In a canoe. On skis. On a bike. You will help people coexist by sharing resources and courage and openness and smarts.

This is the question of your times: How do we live together in a time of inequality and anxiety and distrust? We challenge you to put aside that anxiety and replace it with hope—the hope of sharing your privilege. As a Middlebury graduate, you need to be the person who walks out of your own room and sits with another, helping him or her to recover and then change the world. You need to be the caring person who gathers around the 90-year-old runner, giving him the energy to finish his final lap in style.

You are the hope in the tumult of your times. You are the hope in the fast clash of fact and opinion, the polarization amid the plenty, the search for identity amid the agonizing pains of a changing planet.

Middlebury salutes you. Starting tomorrow, you will have an awesome opportunity, an opportunity that is also an obligation: to share the Middlebury gifts you have been given with people who need them. Tomorrow you will begin answering your question, "How do we live together?" I know you well enough to know that the answer will be thoughtful, spirited, and compelling. You are the hope of unexpected common ground. Congratulations to you all.

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